The Rumpelton Legend

By the late 24th century, the story of Ralph Rumpelton had become impossible to separate from the mythology surrounding it.

The older robots told the story to the younger ones during the long maintenance nights, when the cities were quiet and the stars could still be seen through the atmospheric shields.

“They say Rumpelton was the first,” an old service robot would begin.

“The first what?”

“The first human to work with artificial intelligence and build an entire art empire.”

The younger robots were always fascinated.

“Was he famous?”

“We don't know.”

“Was he rich?”

“We don't know.”

“What did he look like?”

The old robot would pause.

“Nobody ever saw Rumpelton.”

This usually produced considerable discussion among the younger robots.

“How can nobody have seen him?”

“That is the problem.”

What was known was that an enormous body of artwork had survived from the early digital age. Paintings, manifestos, strange theoretical writings, catalogs, archives and endless references to something called Rumpeltonianism. There were arguments among historians over whether Rumpelton had actually been a human being or merely a fictional identity adopted by an artist.

Some scholars believed Rumpelton had been an early pioneer of human-AI collaboration. Others argued that the entire phenomenon was an elaborate conceptual artwork. A particularly controversial school maintained that Rumpelton had never existed at all.

The old robots regarded this last theory with some amusement.

“Then who made the paintings?” a young robot would ask.

Nobody had a satisfactory answer.

And so the legend continued.

Eventually the younger robots would stop asking questions and simply stare into the fire.

“Maybe Rumpelton was an AI,” one would say.

“Maybe,” the old robot replied.

“Maybe he was a human.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe he was both.”

The old robot smiled.

“That is what makes Rumpelton interesting.”

Then, as the fire burned down and the younger robots returned to their charging stations, the old robot would say the same thing it had said for generations:

“We don't know whether Rumpelton was the first great AI artist, the greatest prank in art history, or something nobody has thought of yet.”

He paused.

“But the paintings are still here.”

And that was enough.

The legend grew.